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Alexander Hamilton vs. Aaron Burr: A Duel at Dawn

On the morning of July 11th, 1804, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton were rowed across the Hudson River in separate boats to a secluded spot near Weehawken, New Jersey. There they participated in the most famous duel in American history. Hamilton was struck in the side by a pistol shot from Burr and passed away the next day. Burr was unhurt, but found that his reputation suffered an equally fatal wound. Though Hamilton was the only participant mortally wounded, both participants were casualties.

This duel was certainly not a spontaneous decision on the part of either participant, but rather the Burr–Hamilton duel arose from a long-standing political and personal rivalry that had developed between both men over a course of several years. Their famous duel was merely the bursting point of this conflict. \*Switch slides\*

The rift began in 1791 when Burr captured a Senate seat from [Philip Schuyler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Schuyler), Hamilton's father-in-law. Being a Federalist, Hamilton strongly disagreed with Burr’s Republican views. By the time Burr had unseated a member of Hamilton’s family they had become lifelong enemies. For the two men, it was all downhill from there. \*Switch slides.\*

Nine years later Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton’s intense rivalry became public knowledge during the presidential election of 1800. Burr ran as vice –president alongside the presidential favorite, Thomas Jefferson, both under the Republican Party. When Jefferson and Burr accidentally tied for the presidential spot as a result of a mistake made by the Republican Party electors, Hamilton stepped in. He lobbied his fellow Federalists in the House of Representatives to elect Thomas Jefferson, his most hated political enemy above that of Aaron Burr; because he believed he would be better suited for the presidency than Burr. This came as a shock to the House and a political and personal blow to Burr to know that Hamilton regarded him below Jefferson, the one person Hamilton had spent almost his entire life campaigning against. \*Switch Slides\*

Four years later, on April 24, 1804, a letter originally sent from [Charles D. Cooper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_D._Cooper) to [Philip Schuyler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Schuyler), Hamilton's father-in-law[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-6) and was mysteriously published in the [*Albany Register*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Albany_Register&action=edit&redlink=1). The main point of the letter seemed to be opposition of Burr's candidacy.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-7) It claimed to describe "a still more despicable opinion of Burr” as expressed by Alexander Hamilton at a political dinner. Burr was furious when he heard news of the letter and the opinion Hamilton had expressed of him. He demanded an immediate apology which of course Hamilton refused saying that “he could be not be responsible for other’s interpretations of his words”. This was the last straw for Burr and he challenged Hamilton to a duel in which try as he might he could not refuse. \*Switch Slides\*

Nevertheless, early on the morning of July 11, 1804, the two men were rowed across the Hudson River and met on the heights near Weehawken, New Jersey. \*Switch Slides\*

The two exchanged pistol shots; Hamilton, not wanting to hit Burr fired his pistol into the air, but aimed to miss Burr and sent his shot above his head into a nearby tree, Burr not knowing that Hamilton had intentionally missed, fired his own shot at him. Hamilton was hit in the stomach with the bullet lodging in his spine. He lingered for 30 hours, eventually dying and left behind his wife, and seven children. Burr was still vice president at the time of the duel, but clearly his political career was finished, and the news of Hamilton’s death deeply shocked the nation.\*Switch Slides\*

In the aftermath neither participant was left unscathed. While Hamilton was shot, and eventually died, he died with honor and admiration. Hamilton's family and supporters played up his image of respectability and insisted he died having not backed down from the challenge, instead choosing to duel to protect his honor. Hamilton went down forever in history with praise and admiration from the people as a great and influential martyr for Federalism. America remembered him for all he had accomplished and greatly mourned his death. A grand funeral was held in his honor, in which hundreds turned out to grieve, this included some of New York's most prominent and wealthy figures and several hundred ordinary citizens.\*Switch Slides\* Here is a photo of the statue erected of Alexander Hamilton in Central Park. Instead of blaming Hamilton for what had happened that fateful day, the public turned to Burr with anger and resentment for killing (if accidently) such an influential American leader. \*Switch Slides\* Obviously this was the monument that was never erected for Aaron Burr \*Switch Slides\*

When it was all over Burr certainly didn’t feel like the lucky one. After the duel, Thomas Jefferson dropped him from his second term election ticket. He was briefly indicted for murder, but never prosecuted. Even so, Burr’s political career was over. Cries of "Murderer" followed him everywhere he went in the North. He had lost the respect of many Americans and his character and actions both during, and after the duel were frequently judged and picked apart by fellow politicians and newspapers. Burr had become the most despised national leader since Benedict Arnold. He eventually retreated to the Louisiana Territory and attempted to build an army of supporters, of which he would be in charge, and use to take over the port of New Orleans. His plan was to start his own little Western kingdom from which he could launch attacks on Spanish Texas, and Florida. He even tried to recruit England to send soldiers and money to help support and fund his project to break away from the U.S. After years of plotting and a small, failed attempt to overtake the city, he was finally captured and quickly tried for treason.\*Switch Slides\*

Personally, I found that once all the facts of the duel and its aftermath were lined up, it was easy to see that both politically and personally Burr was most embarrassed and devastated by the duel’s outcome. \*Switch Slides\*

For both Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr this duel was just one challenge that neither man could overcome.